

2

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Civic Religion

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Rev. Washington Gladden, D. D.

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CIVIC RELIGION.

Rev. Washington Gladden, D. D.,
Columbus, Ohio.

The mention of religion as one of the elements of municipal reform is likely to awaken dissent. "Religion," it will be said, "has no place in our discussions. The subject can only lead to fruitless controversy. Church and state must be kept wholly apart. The work of securing better city government is a work in which religion can give us no aid."

This may be true, but let us not too hastily admit it. In the olden time it was supposed that religion was an essential element in the life of a city. The sites of many cities were fixed by the use of distinctively religious rites; the founding of the city was religious solemnity. "As the city was the highest unit in the political conception of the Greeks," says Dr. Jebb,

“so each colony contained within itself the essentials of a complete political life. Its relation to the parent city was one of filial piety, not of constitutional dependence. In so far as the cult of the gods and heroes whom it worshiped was localized in the mother country, it was needful that a link should exist between the religious rites of the colony and those of its parent; and this religious continuity was symbolized by the sacred fire which the founder carried with him from the public hearth to the new settlement.”

In the old Roman world the colleges of the Augurs and the Pontifices played a large part in the government of the city, and the functions of the chief magistrate were distinctively religious. And when the monarchy was abolished the Consul succeeded to many of the religious prerogatives of the King; though there was a Pontifex Maximus, the Consul himself “offered prayer and sacrifices for the community and in its name ascertained the will of the gods with the aid of those skilled in sacred lore.” And Guizot tells us that “in the cities of Greek or Roman origin, in most of the ancient cities of Gaul, the magistracies, the religious and civil functions were united. The same

men, the chiefs of families, alike possessed them. It was, as you know, one of the great characteristics of Roman civilization that the patricians were at the same time priests and magistrates within their own houses. There was not then a body especially devoted, like the Christian clergy, to the religious magistracy. The two powers were in the same hands."

Religion was, then, an integral part of the life of a city in the olden time. It was not merely harbored and protected by the city; the administration of religion was just as much a municipal function as was the administration of law; religion was regarded as the very heart of the municipal organism.

Do we say that we have changed all that? Perhaps we have, but are we quite sure that the change is altogether for the better? Was there not an eternal truth underlying those old conceptions—a truth which we despise at our peril? Can any city be well governed without making large appeal to motives and principles which are properly termed religious?

Let me be understood. I do not wish to see the establishment, or the recognition by the municipality, of any religious organization now existing, or of any com-

bination of such organizations. I do not want to see churches or sects of any sort, Jews or Gentiles, Protestants or Roman Catholics, getting possession of the city offices, or directing the policy of the city. When an organization of religionists attempts anything of this kind—undertakes to push its own sectarian interests by the possession and use of the municipal machinery—the popular rebuke can never be too prompt or too energetic.

Nor do I wish to see the municipality making provision out of its revenues for the support or assistance of any institution under the care or direction of any religious body. It is plain that the civil community cannot take all such institutions under its patronage, nor can it discriminate among them. It can only impartially let them all alone.

Nor am I concerned for the maintenance of religious forms and ceremonies in connection with civic functions. Unless the persons in whose presence these acts of worship are performed themselves heartily wish for them and reverently participate in them, I would abolish them at once.

Nor am I in favor of the enforcement, by the city, of any religious observance of

the first day of the week. Sunday legislation ought not to rest upon a religious basis. If a rest day is needful for the preservation of the health and welfare of the community, that observance may be enforced by the majority against the greed of the few who would turn the abstinence of the rest from labor into a special opportunity of gain for themselves. The liberty of rest for the many can only be secured by a law of rest for all. And if it is evident that the open saloon does the community more damage on Sunday than on any other day of the week, then the community has a better reason for shutting it up on Sunday than on other days. But such ordinances as these have absolutely nothing to do with religion. The maintenance of any kind of religious observance by force of law is contrary alike to the spirit of democracy and to the spirit of Christianity. The civic religion for which these words are pleading is nothing of this kind.

Those ancient cities, whose founders bore the sacred fire so carefully over stormy seas, what was the heart of their religion? Was it not this—that they believed their communities to be somehow invisibly linked to an unseen realm; that

they felt themselves to be under the inspiration and guidance of the gods and heroes who had passed beyond their sight? The unseen realm was the realm of the ideal. The society below was in constant contact and communication with a perfect society above, and the guiding lights of that upper world were unveiled to faithful watchers here below. This is the essence of religion; it is faith in the unseen, in the ideal. Of course, the ideal is never visible to the eye of sense. It is the mind's eye that sees it always. It is not the thing that is, it is the thing that may be and ought to be. And the true civic religion is that which beholds by the eye of faith the city that ought to be and shall be, and that looks and works for the day when it shall stand upon the earth. John, in the apocalyptical vision, saw a New Jerusalem—a holy city—descending out of heaven from God to earth. "It was," says Professor Drummond, "no strange apparition, but a city which he knew. It was Jerusalem, a new Jerusalem. The significance of that name has been altered for most of us by religious poetry; we spell it with a capital N, and speak of the New Jerusalem as a synonym for heaven. Yet why not take it as it stands.

as a new Jerusalem? Try to restore the natural force of the expression ; suppose John to have lived to-day and to have said London—‘I saw a new London.’ Jerusalem was John’s London. All the grave and sad suggestions that the word London brings up to-day to the modern reformer, the word Jerusalem recalled to him. What in his deepest hours he longed and prayed for was a new Jerusalem, a reformed Jerusalem. And just as it is given to the man in modern England who is a prophet, to the man who believes in God and in the moral order of the world, to see a new London shaping itself through all the sin and chaos of the city, so was it given to John to see a new Jerusalem rise from the ruins of the old.

* * * This city, then, which John saw is none other than your city, the place where you live, as it might be and as you are to help to make it. It is London, Boston, New York, Paris, Melbourne, Calcutta—these as they might be, and in some infinitesimal degree as they have already begun to be. In each of them and in every city throughout the world to-day, there is a city descending out of heaven from God. Each one of us is daily building up this city or helping to

keep it back. Its walls rise slowly, but as we believe in God, the building can never cease."

This, then, is what I mean by civic religion. It is a recognition of the fact that for every society there is an ideal, that is to say, a divine, social order; it is the attempt to discern and to realize that—to bring the life of the city below into harmony with the law of the perfect city not made with hands which hangs above it in the sky. To believe in the great possibilities of a noble civic life; to fasten our thought upon them; to see that this must be what the "Power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness" is working for and that it is our great privilege to be co-workers with him; to kindle our souls with the enthusiasm of these hopes—this is what I mean by civic religion.

All great and worthy work is done under the inspiration of ideals. The sculptor is looking, not at the things that are seen, but at things that are unseen when he calls the angel out of the marble block. The musician is listening to voices that were never heard on land or sea when he indites the symphony. The architect beholds the temple in the air before he builds it upon the earth. And we to

whom the larger, fairer, diviner task is given of building the city—not merely the streets and parks, the warehouses and shops and halls and homes, but the institutions, customs, laws in which its civic life is manifested—must needs lift our thoughts to realms above ourselves that the pattern of the structure we are to build may be revealed to us.

The city that might be—the city that ought to be—this is the object of our faith, of our devotion. What might this city of ours—this New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, Buffalo, Columbus—what might it be, what ought it to be—how clean and bright and safe and healthful ; how free from everything that could hurt or defile or destroy ; how full of everything that could minister to the comfort and convenience and culture and happiness of the citizens ; its laws how wisely and impartially administered ; its burdens how equitably adjusted ; its curse, how *swift and deadly upon all who seek* to make spoils of its revenue ; its officers, how diligent, how conscientious, how self-denying in the public service ; its citizens, how prompt to respond to the call of the community ; its property-holders, how ready each to bear his por-

tion of the public burden ; its helpless wards, how tenderly cared for ; its beggars and parasites, how sternly compelled to eat their own bread ; its whole life, how instinct with justice and truth and righteousness, how vital with mercy and good will ! This is the city which is coming down out of heaven from God—coming as fast as we make room for it. It comes very slowly, because there are so few who believe in it, and look for it and make ready ; according to our faith it must be unto us. For just as soon as the people begin to believe in a city like this it will be here in all its glory. Nothing hinders its coming—nothing in the world—but our want of faith. Is it not true that the one thing needful is a little more of genuine civic religion ?

Never until some such ideal as this takes possession of the thought of the people, and kindles their enthusiasm, shall we have good government in our cities. Men must have something to believe in, to love, to be loyal to, to fight for ; and it is always the ideal that inspires heroism and devotion. A national idea we have ; the proudest American has some conception of it. It was the nation that might be, the nation that ought to be, that

kindled the ardors of revolutionary patriotism ; that Sam Adams and Patrick Henry plead for, and that Washington and Prescott and Stark and Greene fought for ; it was the nation that ought to be that Meade's army saved from death upon the heights of Gettysburg and that Lincoln crowned there with his immortal words. It has not been the actual nation, with its broken promises and its lame purposes and its piggish politics, that has inspired our ardor of patriotism ; the nation that we live for, and are ready to die for, is the one to whom we cry :

“ Our hearts, our hopes, are all with thee !
Our hearts, our hopes, our prayers, our
tears,
Our faith, triumphant o'er our fears,
Are all with thee—are all with thee.”

It is only because there is an ideal nation to which our love and loyalty can be given that patriotism exists. It is to be feared that such a conception is scarcely entertained in relation to the life of many of our cities. What we are constrained, for want of a better term, to call municipal patriotism hardly has a name to live. There is, indeed, in some cases, not a lit-

the local pride ; but not much thought of the city as invested with a character and life of its own ; as a kind of moral personality towards which one might cherish a loyal love. What is a city? We are told that is a corporation. Well, I am afraid that that is just about all there is of it in the minds of many of us. Such a soulless entity can inspire no love, can call forth no loyalty. It is something that the Legislature has created, and we are not generally moved to worship the work of such hands. The city is thus invested with a kind of legal, formal, artificial character, and there is nothing that appeals to our higher sentiments. These frigid conceptions must be put away from our minds. It may be useful, for some purposes, to consider the city as a corporation ; but unless it is vastly more than that to the great body of its citizens, its history will not be an inspiring one. It seems to me that there ought to be something in the civic life of a great city which admits of idealization ; something that appeals to the imagination of the citizen ; something that inspires in him a genuine devotion. Can we not think of the city in which we live as becoming more and more a great social organism, bound to-

gether by bonds that are not wholly economic—by human sympathies and interests; with a character to develop and a destiny to fulfill; moving steadily forward, under the influence of a righteous purpose, in the ways of peaceful progress, strengthening law, enlarging liberty, diffusing intelligence, promoting happiness. becoming, through the co-operative good will of its people, a mighty and benignant Providence to all who dwell within its walls? Are there not possibilities in the life of these cities of ours that can make a man's heart glow with great hopes and high enthusiasms?

On what forces do we rely for the reformation of our municipal life? For the accomplishment of this work there must be motives. What are they? To what can we appeal?

We can appeal to the citizen's love of comfort and cleanliness; we can show him the filthy streets and the clogged sewers and tell him that such things ought not to be; we can awaken his fears of cholera; and such appeals have their place and are not ineffectual.

We can show him, no doubt, that under such government as he is permitting, there is a great lack of security for his

person and his property; and that, also, is an influential motive.

What we do urge upon him most diligently is the increase of the tax rate, and the fact that unless he is adroit enough to hide his gains from the assessor, his profits will be greatly reduced by the growth of taxation. This is the motive on which we chiefly rely. Municipal reform, in the conception of nine men out of ten, is the reduction of the tax rate. Well, that is not an insignificant matter; it ought to be duly considered, and it will be; there is no danger that it will be overlooked.

But can we draw from all these considerations an adequate motive power for the work of thoroughly reforming the governments of our cities? Will the craving for comfort and the fear of contagion, coupled with the wish for a reduction of taxes, call forth an energy and a unity of popular feeling which will achieve the glorious work? It seems to me that they reckon ill who put their trust in such forces. Down on this plane, pottering with such motives, we shall find our structure crumbling under our hands; any gains that we make in one direction will be neutralized by losses in

another. Unless we can find something higher and nobler than this to work for, our labor will be as the task of Sisyphus.

We sometimes hear it said that the one thing needful is the administration of the municipality on business principles. In a certain narrow sense this saying may be justified. We ought to have a methodical economical administration, of course ; we ought to insist on getting money's worth for our taxes. But other than business principles must control our people and their representatives in office, else we shall continue to have precisely what we have had. The trouble with our citizens—our best citizens—has always been that they have quite too much inclined to base their civic action upon "business principles." They have always wanted to buy the benefits of good municipal government in the cheapest market and to sell them in the dearest. Their problem has been to get just as much as possible for themselves out of the city and to give just as little as possible in return for it—of time, of money, of sacrifice. So long as this is the prevailing purpose of the citizens, it will be the prevailing purpose of their representatives in office ; business principles will

control their conduct ; office will be to them an opportunity of gain, and they will make what they can out of it. I think it is time that we began to see that good government calls for some higher principles on the part of the citizens than what we describe as business principles.

It calls for the recognition of civic ideals ; for a vision that can discern not merely the city that stands upon the earth, but the fairer city which is coming down from heaven to earth, after whose pattern the earthly forms must be continually reshaped. There is just as much need in the city as in the nation of cherishing an ideal of liberty, of purity, of perfection ; of leaving the things that are behind and stretching forth unto the things that are before ; of cultivating a generous faith and a high enthusiasm. There is need of thinking much of a kind of civic life that is not yet, but that might be, and that ought to be, and that must be if there is a God in heaven ; a city whose officers shall be peace and whose exactors righteousness ; a city whose homes shall be sacred and secure ; whose traffic shall be wholesome and beneficent ; whose laborers shall go forth to their cheerful toil unburdened by the

heavy hand of legalized monopolies ;
whose laws shall foster no more curses,
nor open the gates to whatsoever work-
eth abomination or maketh a lie ; whose
streets shall be full of happy children,
playing in safety and learning the great
lessons of civic piety, and whose citizens
on any shore shall find their thoughts
turning homeward with a great longing,
while they cry :

" If I forget thee, O city of my heart !
Let my right hand forget her cunning ;
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
If I remember thee not,
If I prefer thee not
Above my chief joy."

Columbus, Ohio.

